

Seventh Day of History: Lincoln-Douglas Debates

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Abraham Lincoln and Stephen A. Douglas traveled across the state of Illinois in 1858, competing for a seat in the U. S. Senate. Douglas was a senator from Illinois and Lincoln was a relatively unknown lawyer at the time. Lincoln and some of his followers thought that by debating Douglas this would assure that Lincoln would be on the same stage with Douglas. Lincoln and Douglas, well known for their opposing views, went head to head on the issue of slavery, one of the most controversial issues at the time. Lincoln was antislavery and Douglas believed in popular sovereignty, which meant letting the territories decide if slavery should be allowed or not. Although Douglas would go on to win the election and maintain his Senate seat, Lincoln gained national recognition, a step towards his presidency.

The place selected for the last of the seven debates, was Alton, Illinois, on October 15, 1858. This debate was very important since it gave voters the opportunity to hear two sides of an issue. Lincoln and Douglas, using the forum of a debate, and the power of persuasive speaking, attempted to influence the minds of the voters. Even though today we see presidential candidates debate rather often, in the 1800s it was a very unusual event.

Alton, located just twenty miles north of St. Louis, had a population of 6,900 at the time, but another six thousand gathered to watch the debate. Although there were not as many spectators watching the Alton debate as the other six, those in attendance showed considerable enthusiasm. Both debators were greeted warmly, receiving large

rounds of applause as they took the stage and began debating. Lincoln and Douglas debated over three and a half hours going back and forth on the issues of slavery. This was the last debate in the series, and the last chance for either candidate to reveal their thoughts and viewpoints, especially on the issue of slavery. Not only was Alton put on the map by the popularity of the Lincoln-Douglas Debates, but it was also a place where Elijah Lovejoy, an abolitionist, and a popular newspaper editor, was tragically murdered for his beliefs.

Douglas, the first to speak, set the tone for the rest of the debate. He started by attacking Lincoln's policies on slavery and criticizing him on the previous debates. Douglas believed the territories should decide on their own if slavery would be allowed or not. As he continued speaking, he was often interrupted by long and loud rounds of support. He told the crowd that Lincoln was interfering with the people's rights and that by abolishing slavery it would turn the North and South into enemies, not friends and lead to a "house divided." At the end of his speech, Douglas assured the crowds of people that he, and no one else, would make the best Senator.

Abraham Lincoln, who spoke next, told the people that Senator Douglas' words, if he did not know better, sounded like he and Lincoln were side by side. It was unclear what Douglas truly believed because more and more, it sounded like he was agreeing with Lincoln. Lincoln's followers would at times yell out things such as "right" and "true" as he made his comments. Lincoln then said that Douglas, in his statements, had "misrepresented" Lincoln and often stated "untruths" about him, accusing Douglas of using his material from an earlier speech presented in Chicago. Towards the end of the

debate, Lincoln announced that, “All men have the right to strive to be the best they can, but when enslaved they will never have that opportunity.”

Lincoln and Douglas both debated furiously in the senatorial race. Lincoln was a relatively unknown figure before the debates began, but afterwards he became nationally recognized. Although Douglas would win the election in 1858, and was reelected Senator, Lincoln would win the presidential election of 1860.

Lincoln, with his determination, kept pursuing politics even though he was not very successful at first. He knew the country could not survive as half-free and half-slave. Once he became president he pushed for the abolition of slavery, which was what he debated time and time again.

Even though Lincoln and Douglas were both excellent debaters, they had many differences. Lincoln was born into a poor family in Kentucky, while Douglas was born into a wealthy family in Vermont. However, as the years passed, they both became involved in politics. Lincoln was formerly a member of the Whig Party, but later became a Republican. He was a Republican at the time of the Lincoln-Douglas Debates. Douglas, a Democrat, served in the U. S. Senate for many years. Both of these men, Stephen A. Douglas and Abraham Lincoln, are known today as two of the best debaters that history has ever seen, and Lincoln has gone down as one of the greatest presidents the United States has ever known. [From Gabor Boritt, *The Historian's Lincoln*; Russell Freedman, *Lincoln*; Doris Goodwin, *The Political Genius of Abraham Lincoln*; Richard Heckman, *Lincoln vs. Douglas*; Jeff Ruetsche, *This Day in History*; Saul Sigelschiffer, *The American Conscience*; Travelers and Other Observers, *Prairie State*; and David Zarefsky, *Lincoln, Douglas, and Slavery*.]